

The Learning MarketSpace, August 1, 2000

Written monthly by Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg, *The Learning MarketSpace* provides leading-edge assessment of and future-oriented thinking about issues and developments concerning the nexus of higher education and information technology.

QUALITY FOR WHOM?

Quality assurance in distance learning is a hot topic. No issue of the Chronicle would be complete without an article in which some higher education entity questions the "quality" of someone else's effort in this arena—whether it's the AAUP condemning North Central's accreditation of Jones International University, the feds worrying about seat-time and separate-but-equal standards for reviewing distance learning programs, or the AFT advocating that no institution should be allowed to award a degree strictly by distance learning. The debate goes on.

One thing missing from this heated discussion is the student's perspective. What does "quality assurance" mean when you are the one who wants to take a distance-learning course?

To give an example of what life is like for the prospective distance learner, imagine that you are a student looking for the "best" undergraduate course in marketing that's available online, one that you can afford, and one that you can transfer to your home institution.

Try looking at the following three Web sites that aggregate online courses, each a leader in the field, each wanting to encourage greater access and flexibility for both current and potential students by enabling them to study and take classes at any time and from any place.

- The [SUNY Learning Network](#) aggregates the online course offerings of more than 40 State University of New York campuses. During the 1999-2000 academic year, more than 1,000 courses were offered. Students can view a listing of courses sorted by institution, subject matter, course name or level.
- The [Southern Regional Educational Board's Electronic Campus](#) Web site lists more than 2,700 courses. Students can search the site by institution, state, subject matter, delivery media and undergraduate/graduate level.
- The Regents' College [DistanceLearn](#) database, the most comprehensive of the three, lists more than 15,000 online courses. Students can search the database by institution, subject matter, delivery media, undergraduate/graduate level, availability outside of the United States and maximum cost.

What do you discover? The good news is that there are a lot of courses out there. The bad news is that there are a lot of courses out there.

The SUNY site sorts courses alphabetically by course title. This makes finding a marketing course fairly tedious since course titles may begin with "Marketing," "Principles," "Introduction," and so on. You can sort by subject matter, but marketing courses for the fall 2000 term appear under both "Business" (one course) and "Management" (10 courses). "Electronic Commerce," "Fashion Merchandising," and "Retailing" are among the other possible disciplinary homes for marketing as well. The Electronic Campus site's search engine is more sophisticated and returns a list of 14 undergraduate marketing courses for the summer 2000 term.

The Regents College site allows you to select "Business Administration and Management" from a list of disciplines and then "Marketing" from a list of specific course subjects. When printed out, the resulting course listing, sorted by graduate and undergraduate courses, is five pages long (single-spaced)! An estimated 400 undergraduate courses in marketing are available.

The Regents site is illustrative of the problem. Let's suppose that the ideal situation from the consumer's point-of-view would be one mega-site that lists all online courses. (This may be the ideal situation from the provider's point-of-view as well since a major time consumer for institutions is providing course and program data in a multitude of formats for the many course aggregators currently in existence. At a minimum, surely students and institutions would benefit from an agreement among these aggregators to display course data in a common format.) If such a site existed, how many online marketing courses would result from a search? Hundreds? Thousands?

Returning to our example, the Regents College database takes a big step forward over other Web sites by allowing students to sort by cost. (One would think that SUNY can side-step that problem since tuition is standard throughout the system, but you'll need to get out your calculator when you discover the variety of fees that need to be tacked on to the course tuition.) If a student can only afford \$100 for a course, it doesn't help to sort through hundreds of courses that cost more than that.

What about enrollment information? Browse through some of the course listings and look especially at the prerequisites. In many cases, you will find that you must be enrolled in a degree program at the home institution in order to take the course. Other courses list things like "56 semester hours completed" or "junior standing in business" as a prerequisite. (Where? At the student's home institution or at the listing institution?) In other cases, specific prerequisite courses are listed. Unfortunately, most of these are described as ECO 201, MA 222, MKTG 101, and so on, in a language unintelligible to all but the most clairvoyant registrars. Suppose you've taken the equivalent of ECO 201 at your home institution? Does that count? And finally, the worst case description of the necessary prerequisites: "No data given."

Let's assume that common data formats and better search engines can resolve many of these issues. Students will be able to obtain a list of affordable courses in which they can, in fact, enroll. What remains is the primary question: how do you make a choice among them? Which has the highest quality or, at least, "good enough" quality for your particular purposes?

All of the institutions listed on each of these Web sites are regionally accredited. This suggests that accreditation may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure quality from the student's point-of-view. Online learning poses a set of issues about what information consumers need to make intelligent choices among a bewildering array of new and unfamiliar options, simply because there are more options.

As George Connick has observed, any discussion about quality in a distributed learning environment must first ask "quality from whose perspective?" If we are looking at quality from the viewpoint of most traditional higher education institutions, we are likely to get a very different answer than one offered by students studying via technology, especially distant learners.

--CAT

WILL CARNIVORE EAT "THE PLANT"?

Spam, Napster, Carnivore, workplace monitoring, "The Plant", cookies, export controls on encryption, pornography, ownership of courseware: What do they all have in common? Each is a facet of the perplexing tradeoff between access and security. In simple terms, and perhaps too simple, you can make it secure or you can make it accessible. One trades off for the other. The more secure the less accessible and the more accessible the less secure. The problem is akin to finding a guard dog that is ferocious enough to scare off burglars but sufficiently docile so as to not bite the postal carrier.

This tradeoff is the most difficult problem of the information age. Our industrial age technologies were capital intensive and not capable of nearly free, nearly perfect, replication. One couldn't clone a Ford Mustang or a Sunbeam Toaster for any cost significantly less than the purchase price—and generally the cost would have been a lot higher. The same was even true for light lens photocopying where a book could be copied with reasonable fidelity, but not reasonable price. About the only things that could be reasonably cloned were knock-offs of items priced at greater than their intrinsic value such as Dior gowns or Callaway golf clubs.

The Net has changed all this in the information age. Let's look at a sample of last week's news for examples extracted from "Above the Fold", a [NewsScan](#) service.

- Opposition is mounting to the Clinton Administration plans to use its "Carnivore" software system to monitor a criminal suspect's e-mail messages as they pass through an Internet service provider. The FBI says this system is not intended to extend the government's surveillance capabilities, but merely to update their methods to cope with changing technology, but House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Tex.) says: "Nobody can dispute the fact that this is not legal within the context of any current wiretap law."
- Horror writer Stephen King has now used his Web site to post the first two installments of his new novel "The Plant," which is about a "vampire" plant that takes over a publishing company. The material will be posted as pdf files, and readers will be trusted to pay the author a dollar to download it. If King receives payment for at least 75% of the downloads, he will continue with his plans to post the remainder of the book on the Web. People in the publishing industry are skeptical.
- The U.S. House of Representatives passed 427-1 a bill that would require senders of unsolicited commercial e-mail messages to provide a valid return e-mail address that recipients of the messages could use to take them off the mailing list. Under the law, the Federal Trade Commission could bring legal actions against spammers who willfully ignore it.
- The British government appears likely to enact legislation that would allow law enforcement authorities to intercept personal and corporate e-mail messages and would require Internet service providers to install, at their own expense, surveillance equipment that would resend some of their customers' messages to a monitoring center run by the domestic security service, MI5.
- A coalition of trade groups representing more than 20 entertainment and film companies has sued Scour, a company backed by Hollywood powerbroker Michael Ovitz, which has developed a Napster-like search engine that enables users to trade films and music on the Web. The case is similar to the recording industry's lawsuit against Napster, whose service enables users to swap songs for free by trading MP3 files. Both suits seek preliminary injunctions to have unauthorized copyrighted material pulled off these sites, claiming losses in revenues and creative control for artists.
- Microsoft is about to begin testing new software to allow users of its Internet Explorer software to receive alerts when there is an attempt to place "cookies" on their hard disks by Web sites they visit. Cookie trails are used by many sites to follow the travels of Web surfers in order to provide them with personalized content and/or targeted advertising.
- A speech by White House chief of staff John D. Podesta has pleased the business community with the Administration's new software encryption policy, which will loosen export controls on encryption

technology, but upset civil libertarians with the Clinton Administration's position on allowing law enforcement agencies to monitor Internet traffic.

- Eight movie studios have gone to court charging that Eric Corley, who publishes the computer hacker magazine and Web site called "2600," has violated the law by distributing software that breaks the code used to encrypt DVDs. An attorney for the studios warned: "The threat of world copying is here and the process has begun. It will become an avalanche unless this court acts."
- A group of bipartisan lawmakers has introduced legislation that would require companies to disclose their workplace monitoring activities to employees when they are hired, and to update them on an annual basis. Under the bill, employers could still secretly monitor an employee if there is "reasonable" suspicion that illegal activity is taking place, but workers could not be routinely monitored without their knowledge.

That is probably enough, small sample though it is, to get the idea. The security verses access tradeoff is a new problem, lacking in case law precedents, that has plenty of people lining up on the polar extremes of each instance. It seems likely that society will struggle with the facets of this issue for quite some time to come. If there is a single, underlying principal that should guide us, it has yet to be discovered.

Higher education is not immune to these issues, although they may wear somewhat different clothing. We have discussed the Napster phenomenon and the privacy issues surrounding the use of commercial campus portals in previous issues. One of the current conundrums bedeviling higher education is the question of ownership of courseware developed by faculty. Is it work for hire or is it, like copyrighted scholarly publication, something owned by the faculty--is it accessible or secure?

And what about the use of the campus network for facilitating student and faculty outside interests? Should it be encouraged, discouraged, or should we take a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude? A recent court case in Virginia has declared that pornography, at least, is out of bounds. Will other states follow suit? How do we handle use of the campus network for distribution of material considered to be harassing? Institutions are criticized for not having a policy and then criticized for policies that are over broad. It takes a significant amount of time for a body of case law to develop that will define an acceptable envelope for such policies. Is there hope that we will come to terms with the issues prior to that?

Does the institution have a responsibility for prohibiting or discouraging the use of peer-to-peer protocols like Napster that facilitate copyright infringement? Does a student have the "right" or the expectation not to be bombarded with advertisements from a commercially-provided campus portal? How should the campus deal with the proliferation of net-based services that provide material that encourages plagiarism?

The list of access/security issues is long, the set of answers is basically empty. Higher education could do itself and society a big favor by taking on this problem.

--RCH

UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

STATE-OF-THE-ART LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: PEW GRANT PROGRAM IN COURSE REDESIGN ROUND I RESULTS

November 13, 2000 Orlando Airport Marriott, Orlando, Florida
February 26, 2001, Dallas, Texas

Co-sponsored by the Executive Forum in Information Technology at
Virginia Tech

This seminar will present results from the second of three rounds of the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign. Learn from faculty project leaders how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology. Faculty from four institutions will talk about their models of course redesign, including their decisions regarding student learning objectives, course content, learning resources, course staffing and task analysis, and student and project evaluation. These models provide varied approaches that demonstrate multiple routes to success, tailored to the needs and context of each institution.

These seminars provide a unique opportunity for you to:

- Learn firsthand how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology from successful faculty project leaders.
- Find out how to design learning environments for the future by tapping the expertise of those who have done it.
- Talk with experienced faculty from multiple institutions about how and why they made their redesign decisions.
- Move beyond "today" and learn where on-line learning is going . . . find a model that will work for your institution.

STRATEGIES FOR AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO E-LEARNING

September 18 - 19, 2000

Charleston Place, Charleston, South Carolina

Sponsored by Eduprise.

This invitational seminar will provide Chief Executive and Chief Academic Officers an opportunity to develop a strategy framework for e-Learning that is attuned to institutional resources and goals and open to commercial and nonprofit partnerships as a means to achieve focus and a favorable return on investment. Participants will interact with peers and nationally recognized speakers to discuss assessing organizational readiness to implement an effective e-Learning program; planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating e-instruction; linking IT investments to strategic academic goals; insourcing versus outsourcing; and finding an appropriate balance between a virtual-campus instructional program and virtual enhancements to traditional classroom-based instructional programs.

There is no registration fee to participate in this thought provoking two-day session.

THE LEARNING MARKETPLACE: NEW RESOURCES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Seminar: Thursday, October 26, 2000, 8:30 am-4:00 pm
Product Demos: Wednesday, October 25, 2000, 4:00-7:00 pm
Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Moderators: Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg More and more companies are entering the higher education market, providing new and different approaches to supporting your teaching/ learning efforts. This workshop provides a rare opportunity for you to compare and contrast commercial offerings in an impartial environment and to gain an overall understanding of the industry.

- Learn in one day what would take you many to find out on your own.
- Identify potential partners for developing new learning environments.
- Meet your colleagues who are wrestling with the same set of issues.
- See product demonstrations (optional activity on October 25).

If you are involved in decisions regarding expenditure of funds for teaching/learning services and products, you can't afford to miss this workshop!

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